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SUBJECT: Jeans Campaign: Youth Try To Unite Through Denim

Ref: 05 Minsk 1419

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The human rights NGO Charter97 recently reported that on January 16 the Free Belarus Coalition launched the "jeans campaign." The youth-driven jeans campaign, which grew out of the Day of Solidarity nonviolent resistance campaign, aims to provide Belarusians a safe way to express their support for democratic change. Supporters of the campaign only have to wear denim. According to the website, a "jeans flash mob" of youth activists on January 16 decorated the entrance of Belarus' State Department Store with denim ribbons, although independent witnesses or evidence of such decorations have not been located. In a January 19th meeting with Ambassador, however, Charter97 international relations coordinator Andrei Sannikov confirmed the launch of the jeans campaign and discussed the Free-Belarus Coalition's coordination with 10+ Coalition candidate Alexandr Milinkevich. Although the idea is fresh and unique, few Belarusians appear to be drawn into the jeans campaign. End Summary.

Jeans Flash Mob Attacks GUM with Denim Ribbons

¶2. (C) On January 19, Ambassador met with international relations coordinator Andrei Sannikov of the human rights NGO Charter97 to discuss the Free-Belarus Coalition (FBC) sponsored "jeans campaign." [Note: The FBC is comprised of Charter97, the youth group Zubr, and the NGO "We Remember."] Sannikov confirmed reports from youth group Zubr and Charter97 that at approximately 6:00 p.m. on January 16 (the fourth Day of Solidarity), a "jeans flash mob" of youth activists approached the State Department Store (GUM) in Minsk and tied jean ribbons to the trees, benches, rails and door handles nearby. This jeans campaign is the latest component of the monthly Day of Solidarity campaign, i.e., the nonviolent resistance movement enabling Belarusians to show solidarity with the families of the politically oppressed (reftel). The Charter97 website reported that the denim-clad group of approximately 200 youth decorated a nearby Christmas tree with denim ribbons and jean pockets with an encircled 16 printed on them Q the symbol of the Day of Solidarity campaign. Sannikov said security forces watched the event and then started to remove the denim pieces shortly after the activists put them up. This process continued until the security officials received inquiries from the journalists covering the event as to why they were removing the denim ribbons.

13. (C) [Note: Poloff visited GUM on January 17 to inquire about the "flash mob" and the denim-decorated Christmas tree. Poloff spoke with several employees who are posted in the GUM entrance hall and who claimed to have worked on January 16, but none of them saw a flash mob or a Christmas tree decorated with jeans. Ambassador mentioned to Sannikov poloff's trip to GUM, but Sannikov affirmed that the jeans flash mob descended on GUM. End Note.]

The Birth of the Jeans Campaign

14. (C) Sannikov explained that the jeans campaign was born at a rally on September 16 - the first Day of Solidarity. The police dispersed the crowd several times and confiscated all flags and paraphernalia. Sannikov explained that at that point, Zubr activist Nikita Sasim tied his denim shirt to a flagpole and waved it at a rally. Sannikov told Ambassador that the Free Belarus Coalition had 400,000 stickers made up depicting the image of Sasim waving his impromptu denim flag. [Note: Sannikov also presented Ambassador a high quality orange sweatshirt with a blue "jeans campaign logo" that the FBC had made up to support the campaign. Post has not noticed any Belarusians wearing such sweatshirts.]

15. (C) Sannikov explained that the FBC chose jeans as the campaign symbol because they offer Belarusians a safe way to show resistance. He pointed out that it is not illegal to wear jeans and the officials cannot do anything legally to those wearing jeans. [Note: The police have found ways to punish denim wearing supporters. The independent media reported that one jeans flash mob activist was charged with littering after passing out denim ribbons and even Sannikov admitted that two other activists were charged with loitering after the January 16 event.]

Foreign Response To Campaign Outstrips Domestic Response

16. (C) Sannikov stated that he was very pleased with the domestic reactions to the campaign. Ambassador, however, noted that there seems to be more reaction to the Day of Solidarity campaign outside Belarus Q namely in Poland Q than inside the country. [Note: Those who do support the jeans campaign seemed to be confined to Minsk. Grassroots leader in Vitebsk Olga Karach told Ambassador on January 20 that no one even knows about the campaign in her region.] Sannikov assured Ambassador that Belarusians are participating in the campaign domestically, but that their efforts Q mainly the candles in the windows Q are not always visible from the street. Sannikov stated the campaigns encourage a type of mobilization that is becoming more important in the run up to the election because they serve as information channels to tell the people that the opponents of the regime and the supporters of change are many.

Coordinate with the Opposition: Milinkevich Wears Jeans Too

17. (C) Sannikov stated that the FBC views Milinkevich as the one legitimate opposition candidate. Sannikov confirmed that the FBC has direct contact and regular meetings with Milinkevich's team, during which the FBC offers advice to the opposition's team. Sannikov also stressed, however, that FBC is not working directly for Milinkevich's team. Instead, Sannikov said the FBC tries coordinating its efforts with Milinkevich's team. For instance, Sannikov told Ambassador that Milinkevich produced his 2006 calendar on a jeans background and that Milinkevich himself wears jeans. [Note: Milinkevich officially confirmed his support of the jeans campaign during his December press conference.] Currently, Sannikov is trying to get Milinkevich's team to agree to have their signature collectors wear denim ribbons, but still do not have a response from Milinkevich's headquarters.

18. (C) The nearly invisible Day of Solidarity and the "jeans campaign" reflect the participation of youth in the democratic movement. These nonviolent resistance efforts currently represent the only nationally coordinated campaigns enabling Belarusians to stand together in solidarity against the GOB. The projected results of the campaign, however, are questionable. Given the popularity of denim and that many people wear jeans without a political agenda, it is not possible to distinguish between those choosing solidarity over fashion. The inability to make this distinction easily results in the lack of an accurate mechanism to measure participation and might lead to inflated reports on the level of support for the campaign. In addition, the FBC still seems more focused on impressing foreign donors than on mobilizing a "grass-root" youth solidarity campaign. Regardless, few Belarusians, even youth, seemed to be attracted to either the jeans campaign or Day of Solidarity. Apathy, fear and perhaps relative satisfaction with the status quo continue to dominate Belarusian society.

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